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EDITORIALS

Let's Stop Baiting the CIA

Last October a Central Intelligence Agency man in Saigon got his name in the papers, lost his cover and had to be transferred. This incident, together with an uneasy feeling that the CIA was working at cross-purposes with the State Department, precipitated a wave of criticism both in the press and in Congress. It was not the first such wave. The CIA has always made many Americans uncomfortable because some of its activities—such as covert operations—are by nature contrary to the U.S. tradition of candor and nonintervention in international affairs. And the CIA is peculiarly vulnerable to critics because it cannot answer them without risking that very secrecy. Anyway, who likes spooks?

Senator Eugene McCarthy (D., Minn.) and Congressman John Lindsay (R., N.Y.) are among the CIA's new-wave critics, accusing it of being inadequately controlled and making its own foreign policy. "It has taken on the character of an invisible government answering only to itself," says McCarthy. "This must stop."

Is the CIA in fact out of control? Senator Thomas Dodd (D., Conn.), one of its defenders, calls the charge "patently ridiculous." By statute, the CIA is answerable to the National Security Council and the President, hence it cannot "make its own foreign policy" but only execute the President's, if the President is on the job. Similarly, abroad: the CIA's agents are responsible to our ambassadors and, as George Kennan testified on his return from Belgrade, "The authority of an ambassador over official American personnel within his territory is just about whatever he wants to make it . . . they have to respect his authority if he insists."

Moreover, the CIA is controlled by Congress as well, through three small but elite subcommittees—one in the Senate, two in the House. Members testify that CIA Director McCone or his deputies report regularly and frankly to them. But critics claim this is inadequate and demand a new joint Senate-House watch-

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dog committee, similar to the one that keeps tabs on the secret-laden Atomic Energy Commission. This watchdog proposal was thoroughly debated in 1956 and turned down by the Senate, 59-27. Although the then Senator John F. Kennedy voted with the minority, as President he opposed any added scrutiny of the CIA, as had Eisenhower. The arguments today are much the same as in 1956, and in our opinion a vote would—and should—turn out about the same. As Dodd says, the watchdog committee idea is a mechanical question of “third-rate importance.” Even with the watchdog committee, nonmember congressmen would still be largely in the dark about some CIA activities, and would therefore have just as much reason to beef about its secrecy as they do now.

“Khrushchev knows more about the CIA than I do,” complained a California congressman. So what? He knows a lot less than he would if Congress knew more.

The CIA has had its successes and its failures in support of U.S. foreign policy, among the former being its role in the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran and of the Arbenz regime in Guatemala a decade ago. Its reputation still suffers from the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Yet the plan the CIA authored—a beachhead for an

exile Cuban government that could be supported militarily—looks pretty good in retrospect. The blame for its calamitous execution must be shared by the CIA and the Pentagon, the State Department and the White House. In any case we shall need the capability for that kind of clandestine operation so long as the Communists continue to set the pace for it.

Even more will we continue to need what constitutes most of the CIA's job—the collection and evaluation of intelligence, some secret and some not. That kind of evaluated knowledge, though it cannot be measured or priced, is power. The CIA puts this power at the disposal of the U.S. government. Although no organ of government can or should be exempt from public scrutiny in a democracy, an agency like the CIA can at least ask that such secrecy as is essential to its function be respected and that its contributions to our security be weighed in the same scale as its indispensable (if unpopular) immunities. By that scale, in our judgment, the CIA to date deserves the confidence of the nation.

MAR 6 1964